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## Existential Uncertainty and the Will to Conform: The Expressive Basis of Coleman's Rational Choice Paradigm

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides a new reading of Coleman's rational choice paradigm. Coleman's overt assumptions about action depicted the latter to be purposive and rational, suggesting that action is taken in order to maximize long-term instrumental utility. This article shows that, in his empirical studies, Coleman relied on expressive assumptions about the motives of action, in particular self-related existential anxieties. Coleman argued that in response to their uncertainty, actors choose to emulate others because conformity allows them to secure their social position in the short term. The decisive motive which appears to drive action is not the maximization of instrumental utility, but rather the short-term reduction of existential uncertainty. According to the standards Coleman set for a pure rational choice model, this type of conformist rationality is not rational in the long run. Future studies may improve on prior efforts to utilize the rational choice program by appreciating that the most known figure in this school himself held two alternative conceptions of action: expressive and rational.

### KEY WORDS

American sociology / Coleman / Parsons / Rational Choice Theory

**F***oundations of Social Theory* (Coleman, 1990b), the paradigm of a sociological rational choice theory, is one of the most cited books in the history of sociology.<sup>1</sup> Its thousand pages testify to Coleman's comprehensive attempt to integrate social theory through a utilitarian rational choice paradigm. Parallel to the publication of his magnum opus, Coleman also inaugurated the

journal *Rationality and Society* and served as its first editor. In addition, he edited an important early anthology on rational choice theory (Coleman and Fararo, 1992) and oriented future studies using this approach (e.g. Schneider and Coleman, 1993). To date, Coleman's work indeed provides the most developed manifesto for an empirically driven rational choice theory (e.g. Hallinan, 1999; Kahlenberg, 2001). Coleman himself – even a decade after his death – is still perceived as the major proponent of this approach, and his empirical investigations are viewed as models for studies oriented by a rational choice paradigm (Heckman and Neal, 1996; Lindenberg, 2000). If there is an exemplar for a purist rational choice advocate, James Coleman is likely the most appropriate choice.

Coleman based his theoretical premises on the principles of economic analysis (Becker, 1976). He argued that actors' rational choice is purposively carried out based on current assets and possible consequences of alternative lines of action (see also Dawes, 1988). His principle of rationality suggests that actors choose a course of action that maximizes their long-term benefits while minimizing costs, based on extant preferences and values. Coleman's general theoretical approach is of utmost importance since it has made further inroads in studies of organizations (Zey-Ferrel, 1998), politics (Morris et al., 2004; Tsebelis, 1991), religion (Young, 1997), education (Hatcher, 1998), and criminology (Newman et al., 1997). Rational choice theory also affected other schools of thought, such as historical sociology (Gould, 2001; Kiser and Hechter, 1998) and Marxist thought (Carver and Thomas, 1995), and currently it is also fashionable in general sociological theory (Ritzer, 2000; Wallace and Wolf, 2005).

Because of this lingering impact and its broadening compass, it is essential to understand that Coleman latently explained action by using expressive assumptions. This article shows that, in contrast to his overt assumptions about the rational maximization of utilities, Coleman's analyses started from the assumption that actors are motivated by short-term, self-related existential anxieties which lead to conformity. Instead of the monolithic interpretation of rational action as the cold maximization of long-term utility, this article shows that Coleman's theory of motivation actually juxtaposed two empirically and analytically distinct mechanisms.

The first mechanism is the attempt to reduce uncertainty by gaining information about assets, conditions, and probable outcomes. This mechanism is based on a conception of 'cold cognitions' that actors use to maximize instrumental profits (Pintrich et al., 1993; Schwartz, 1998). The second mechanism is revealed in actors' attempts to maximize self-respect and buttress their social standing amongst significant others. In contrast to his explicit theoretical commitment to the first mechanism, Coleman's analyses imply that it is the second mechanism that actually determines action and choice. More than maximizing future instrumental utilities, actors act to maximize their short-term existential security.

Against his presupposition of a cold rational actor who attempts to maximize instrumental utility, this article shows that the central proponent of rational choice theory had a hidden, yet pervasive, expressive assumption, namely that actors choose to conform to others' actions in order to alleviate immediate existential

uncertainties and to protect their self-esteem. Actors are actually driven by existential uncertainty and personal anxiety, vying for self-esteem rather than for objective future payoffs. This motive of action appears to be 'warm' and emotional; one that is intimately related to facets of self and identity.

The article starts by situating Coleman's theory of rational choice against the context of the Parsonian theory of action. It then pinpoints Coleman's ambivalent juxtaposition of rational action and normative behavior. The following two sections extract the expressive basis of Coleman's short-term latent principle of maximization of certainty through the reconstruction of two major posts in his prolific empirical career: the study of medical innovation and his studies of schools and student achievement. The article terminates with a discussion of the importance of the two theories of action: the rational and the expressive.

### Coleman's Overriding Project: Rational Actor Theory

Coleman's rational action approach can be appreciated when situated in relation to Parsons' early writing on the voluntaristic theory of action (Parsons, 1937). During the 1930s, Talcott Parsons synthesized classical European sociological traditions with American pragmatist orientations. In so doing, he strove to provide a general, a-historic explanation of individual action within a social context. Building on utilitarian traditions, Parsons argued that, in ideal non-social contexts, actors indeed rationally strive to attain future goals. To do so, they use available resources that enable action and they choose means that maximize payoffs. However, in diverging from classical utilitarian theory, Parsons acknowledged that action is delimited by physical, economic, and normative conditions. Therefore, he defined ideal rational action as the choice of the means that maximize the future attainment of goals. However, he was fully aware that cultural values and norms detract from the maximization of utility (Boudon, 2003).

Parsons only used this rational action framework as a hypothetical ideal type. It served as a scientific heuristic that facilitates comparison with social behavior in different empirical settings. In other words, Parsons used this analytic strategy as a starting point for explaining non-rational behavior, namely the daily deviation of everyday activities from the ideal of rational economic action. To do so, Parsons evoked the concepts of culture, values, and norms from idealistic traditions. He used normative action orientations to show that they not only circumscribe the appropriate means for action, but also decide the very goals that actors wish to attain in the first place. By doing so, he discarded rational action as an empirically effective strategy in social analysis. Conformity to norms became the major explanatory strategy that Parsonian functionalism pursued henceforth (Wright, 1999).

Coleman's overarching theoretical project was to revive Parsons' theory of voluntaristic action (Parsons, 1937) and refocus it on purposive, instrumental rational action. While he rarely admitted early influences on his work (e.g. there is only one mention of Parsons in the index of his *Foundations*), Coleman used the

Parsonian analytic background to distinguish his own approach from Parsons' 'over-socialized' orientation to action. In fact, Coleman suggested that 'it would indeed be a fortunate realization of that early program of his [i.e. Parsons] if at last sociology were to move forward in the development of a theory of action' (Coleman, 1975: 93). In delineating his own intellectual territory, Coleman reverted to the utilitarian tradition and committed himself to a simple general theory of action. The following quote clearly portrays his 'cold' conception of action:

... I will use the conception of rationality employed in economics, the conception that forms the basis of the rational actor in economic theory. This conception is based on the notion of different actions (or, in some cases, different goods) having a particular utility for the actor and is accompanied by a principle of action which can be expressed by saying that the actor chooses the action which will maximize utility. (Coleman, 1990b: 14)

This quote suggests that, in developing his rational choice model, Coleman used classical liberal instrumental presuppositions (Alexander, 1987; Boudon, 2003). In doing so, he suggested that individuals always pursue their best interests, and that they do so purposively, in a rational, maximizing manner (Coleman, 1966, 1990b). Paradoxically, however, Coleman's studies seem to have reverted to Parsons' sociological turf. While he indeed attempted to develop a full-blown rational action theory, and distinguished his approach from that of Parsons, he ended up explaining action and choice using similar normative concepts. True, Coleman's conception of human motivation is different from that adopted by functionalism. However, counter to his theoretical emphasis on instrumental rationality, the following analyses show that his studies focus on the will of actors to conform to communal norms. Therefore, the major explanatory mechanisms in his model are group cultures, status values, and normative orientations – causes of action that are in many cases closer to the Parsonian model he rejected.

### Explaining Behavior: The Rational Choice to Conform

In Coleman's view, actors purposively develop norms in social systems – in labor unions, in professional groups, in schools and communities. However, his definition of norms sees them as 'antitheses of rationality'. For him, norms are externalities for individuals; they are hindrances on rational action. He thought that rational action is only possible when actors are left to their own senses; that only in *Gesellschaft*-type, liberal free-market settings can actors maximize their instrumental utilities (Toennies, 1957[1887]). In contrast, he assumed that stable *Gemeinschaft*-like networks and tightly knit social structures cloud long-term rational calculations. This rational actor paradigm suggests that, when people have to consider social commitments and are expected to follow collective norms, they cannot act selfishly, nor can they rationally maximize their future instrumental utilities. Under these circumstances, they choose not to act according to their objective long-term interests, thereby jeopardizing their instrumental rationality and future autonomy.

In that sense, Coleman's rational choice paradigm follows Parsons' dictum, namely that actors can maximize their utilities only in a perfect free market, where they have no stable commitments to others and can selfishly act in the absence of normative regulations (see also Weber, 1978: 635–40). Free decisions and rational choice imply autonomy and independence, the very antithesis of stable social structures and closed networks. Nevertheless, Coleman differed from the Parsonian model by perceiving rational action not as an ideal type that is conceptualized for the purpose of comparison, but rather as a realist model of human action.

However, instead of long-term objective instrumental utilities, Coleman's empirical studies suggest that he thought that actors maximize immediate expressive utilities, namely their sense of personal certainty and self-image rather than their long-term instrumental interests. He suggested that, while actors forgo the maximization of long-term profits, they nonetheless act rationally because they choose to maximize their self-esteem and existential security – largely because of latent expressive motives. He intimated that the actor's choice to obey norms and imitate significant others is a very rational strategy to decrease uncertainty and buttress self-worth in the short term – even at the price of sacrificing long-term instrumental utilities.

Indeed, Coleman grappled with the rationality of action and its embeddedness in social structures throughout his career. His dual orientation to actual processes of choice was already evident in his dissertation on political voting patterns in the International Typographical Union, partly appearing in *Union Democracy* (Lipset et al., 1956). This early work already signaled that, along with his ideal model of cold instrumental rationality, Coleman also explained concrete cases of choice through recourse to structural properties of social systems, namely normative factors, status systems, and network structures. In Coleman's empirical explanation of action – and counter to his alleged commitment to the instrumental rational action orientation – norms and values are the actual explanatory mechanisms that determine the specific choices that actors make. He shows that people will to conform to their peer groups because in this way they maximize their personal certainty. From this perspective, rationality appears to be the motivating 'engine' that drives the willful, voluntary act of choice; it explains the will to conform. However, it is norms and their expressive functions that decide the direction and content of action.

Coleman's attempt to bridge between rational choice and normative conformism continually resurfaced in his work until his very last days. In a handwritten letter to Jon Clark, editor of a book celebrating his life's work, Coleman explained why assessment of his *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990b) requires time to ripen. To explain his reasoning, he used an example from the politics of the invasion of Grenada. He argued:

The problem was that people didn't know how they felt until they knew how others felt. It took a lot of talking and listening, even by the broadcasters, until people came to have an idea just what the event meant, just how to interpret and react to it. (Quoted in Clark, 1996: 3)

This example shows that, for Coleman, people lose direction without a guiding social group. Actors' uncertainty magnifies rational information-seeking behavior. But he seems to suggest that the choices actors make are those that maximize their sense of self-assuredness in the short term rather than their objective payoffs in the long haul.

### Uncertainty and Existential Anxiety – Medical Innovation

Coleman's latent ruminations about the maximization of existential certainty rather than instrumental utility are clearly delineated in his early study of the diffusion of medical innovations. In this study, Coleman and his colleagues sought to understand what makes doctors choose new drugs and how information about these is distributed through doctors' social networks. The scholars aimed at disentangling personal from social determinants of doctors' choices to adopt a new drug for treating patients (Coleman et al., 1957; Coleman et al., 1966a). In doing so, they distinguished between two types of motivation that drive the decision to adopt new drugs. These types of motivation provide clues pertaining to Coleman's way of thinking about the reasons underlying choices.

The starting point for the authors' analysis is modernity's predicament of uncertainty. The phenomenological experience of uncertainty is intensified with social progress, and is acutely felt in complex social roles (Coser, 1991; Merton, 1976). Compared to traditional settings, modern urban society is rampant with frequent and rapid changes. These continual changes repeatedly obliterate previously trusted schemes for action, and require constant and pragmatic accommodation to ever-renewing circumstances. Fearful of unknowns and wary of the unexpected, modern actors sharpen their rational sensibilities and look for means to alleviate uncertainty. This line of reasoning is clearly stated in the opening statements of *Medical Innovation*:

The consequences of society's incomprehensibility make us all uneasy. We are affected by events we do not understand, by men we have never met, by organizations of which we have never heard ... The uncertainty becomes particularly great when something new arrives on the scene – a new product, such as a new car; or a new event, such as Russia's launching of Sputnik; or a new political party. How will people respond to this innovation; how will the event restructure their opinions and actions? ... In modern society, beset by a separation of parts and beleaguered by constant innovation, no one knows the answers. (Coleman et al., 1966a: 4–5)

This general observation about modernity and uncertainty is especially true in medicine. As in other scientific disciplines, new developments, novel techniques and pharmaceutical innovation constitute the hallmark of modern medicine. Indeed, doctors are frequently provided with new evidence, drugs, and technologies. However, these rapid advances inadvertently exacerbate uncertainty and increase inherent dilemmas in the doctor's role. While old procedures provide a sense of short-term certainty, innovations may prove to provide better payoffs over the long haul. Therefore, doctors experience strain and are challenged to look for means to gain more certainty. As suggested in the following:

From the individual practitioner's point of view, therefore, the host of new medical developments, large and small, that make their appearance each year have created new problems ... For the physician, working in a field of many uncertainties, is now asked to choose between a tried and true, albeit imperfect, technique, and a new one which, although an improvement over the old, carries with it new and unknown certainties. This is seen most clearly in the case of new medications ... The doctor must decide whether to increase uncertainty in the short run on the chance that it will decrease in the long run. Again, the doctor faces a dilemma. (Coleman et al., 1966: 10–11)

Though rarely specified, the experience of uncertainty is the actual engine in Coleman's rational actor model. Uncertainty produces tension and the motivation to alleviate it; it produces a psychologically non-stable condition that calls for resolution. As Coleman suggested in a technical monograph on *Models of Change and Response Uncertainty* (1964), people in uncertain conditions tend to seek certainty, even at the price of negating their own perceptions and by sacrificing long-term personal interests. In that context he used the famous rod-length experiments by Asch to show that actors choose to be existentially secure in a supporting social group rather than being empirically correct in isolation. In other words, Coleman regarded uncertainty as a major source of motivation and a catalyst for rational action.

Coleman's discussion of uncertainty had two different denotations. The first relates to uncertainty that results from a lack of information about objective circumstances. This type of uncertainty motivates a rational search for different sources of information. The second meaning of uncertainty refers to existential insecurity about oneself. Unpredictable conditions challenge actors' self-efficacy; they risk people's self-confidence and jeopardize their esteem and appreciation by community members. In the context of medical practice, innovations provoke both types of uncertainties: informational and existential.

Coupled with the two aforementioned meanings of uncertainty, Coleman shows that, to escape role dilemmas and alleviate uncertainties inherent in choosing new medications, doctors rely on two primary sources of information. Firstly, they seek out objective data about the new drug, namely about its efficacy and side effects. They talk to the 'Detail Man' (the representative of pharmaceutical firms), read scientific journals and scan drug-house brochures. Secondly – and more importantly – doctors seek interpersonal reassurance from their peers. Before choosing to adopt a new drug, doctors scout their networks to learn what prominent doctors have chosen to do. Hence, before making their own decisions about a medication – and notwithstanding the fact that they already command all the necessary scientific evidence about it – doctors look to their colleagues and friends and seek their approval. It seems that Coleman suggested that doctors decide to conform to their colleagues' choices rather than trust the objective information they collated. This decision to conform to others' choices alleviates existential uncertainty. It is based on short-term existential motivation to protect social status and self-worth, rather than long-term instrumental utility.<sup>2</sup>



Sidelined evidence indeed suggests that the primary motive of doctors is to ensure their self-respect in the local community rather than to gain information about drugs (Coleman et al., 1966a: 13, note 8). The authors suggested that patients' recurring ailments challenge their doctors' professional standing in the community. And since doctors 'are concerned with maintaining or increasing their standing in the community' (Coleman et al., 1966: 12), their success in combating illness affects their good name. Fearing the loss of community respect (which is based on success in using extant procedures), doctors actively consult with their peers about new drugs. They listen to peer recommendations, and then conform to the choices made by prominent doctors in their own networks. In that sense, the community of doctors provides relief for existential uncertainty – which from this perspective appears to be the primary determinant of decision-making. The following quote exemplifies this analytic position:

Confronted with the need to make a decision in an ambiguous situation – in a situation that does not speak for itself – people turn to each other for cues as to the structure of the situation. When a new drug appears, doctors who are in close interaction with their colleagues will similarly interpret for one another the new stimulus that has presented itself, and will arrive at some shared way of looking at it ... [this] arises from the need for social validation in a situation where authoritative objective validation is scanty. (Coleman et al., 1966a: 118–23)

Based on the analysis of doctors' discussion networks, the authors show that in circumstances of uncertainty doctors use their social networks to get peer advice. The community of peers emerges as the source for advice and the portal for information about normative practices. As in his study of voting in the International Typographical Union, Coleman found that the characteristics of medical communities affect personal decisions as well as collective responses to innovation. That network structures affect the diffusion of new drugs is supported by the evidence: socially integrated doctors adopt new drugs earlier than socially isolated individuals. However, Coleman argued that early adopters tend to do so not so much due to the rational, scientific assessment of the new drug, i.e. because of its advantages and side-effects; rather, he argued that it is existential uncertainties that lead doctors to be conformists and do whatever their esteemed colleagues do.

A doctor's choice to emulate esteemed colleagues is rational in that conformity allows effective decision-making and the reduction of existential uncertainty. But this type of conformist rationality is not substantively rational according to the standards of a pure rational choice model, namely maximization of future instrumental payoffs. As a matter of fact, doctors are not content with robust empirical assessments of all possible alternatives, even though they do gather all possible information about new drugs they consider administering to their patients. Even with these rational resources, however, doctors are left anxious and insecure about unintended consequences for their self-esteem. As a result, they eagerly follow informal messages that flow in advice networks, especially those with abundant social capital and trust. However, in trusting others, doctors actually sacrifice their own substantive rationality. With this

analysis Coleman showed that even doctors – whom Parsons (1954) deemed the epitomizers of modern rationality – add an expressive motivation to the rational calculation of the pros and cons of medication. He has shown that, under conditions of uncertainty, doctors choose to conform – namely, to choose what others have elected – so as to gain social validation.

This analysis can be readily summarized. Coleman argued that uncertainty produces two kinds of motivation. The first and substantively rational drive is to collect information. The second drive is to protect self-worth and social status. Coleman's analyses suggest that, while information and evidence constitute the conditions for decision-making, social networks are drawn upon to answer the more pressing motivation: maintaining self-worth. Action, then, is not only instrumentally rational – it is partly driven by existential anxieties that seek resolution. Actors choose to resolve these worries by conforming to the values, norms, and decisions that other prominent figures signal through their peer networks.

### Timidity and Conformity to Peer Values: Adolescent Motivation

This duality appears again in Coleman's many studies of student achievement. His preoccupation with student achievement was evident from his very first studies of school cultures (Coleman, 1961), through his report on racial inequality (Coleman et al., 1966b), and up to his analysis of public and private schools (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Coleman et al., 1982). In these diverse investigations, Coleman constantly sought strategies to inform public policy and reform school organization in order to improve student achievement (e.g. Coleman, 1997). Since he assumed that students intentionally decide how much effort to invest in school based on instrumentally rational calculations, he thought that societal transformations and extant features of communities and schools tilt student calculations against learning. Like employees in the Hawthorn studies, he argued that students limit effort in learning and thereby curb their achievements in school.

The following reading of his work again exposes his duality about rationality and conformity. Underlying his explicit rational presuppositions, Coleman's explanation of student motivation again sets out from expressive motives: students' insecurity and personal anxiety amongst peers. He suggested that the solution that students crave, namely to conform to their peers, is indeed rational, but not in a substantive instrumental manner. The analysis starts by reviewing Coleman's emphasis on student conformity as a rational choice under conditions of existential insecurity. It ends by deciphering the expressive undertones in his explanation of student achievement.

Coleman assumed that students are purposive, active players in school; namely that they weigh up different alternatives rationally and make choices that maximize their instrumental interests. Upon deeper scrutiny, however, Coleman showed that students' rationality is that of avid conformists rather

than that of autonomous free choosers. His analyses suggested that students choose to obey the adolescent status system that most rewards the immediate pursuit of popularity. But in the long run, these expressive-driven choices jeopardize students' interests and imperil their human capital (Coleman, 1967).

In his early investigation of *The Adolescent Society*, Coleman (1961) showed that while schools and parents invest great effort in communicating the importance of diligence, hard work, and high academic standards, students evade adult expectations and choose normative paths that emphasize popularity and success in sport. He showed that students avoid exerting effort in academic learning, while choosing to be remembered as top athletes (among boys) or as most popular (among the girls). Coleman's empirical analysis of the adolescent subculture in 10 schools showed that students conclude that they are better off obeying the adolescent subculture and their peers' norms while depressing their effort in learning. Otherwise, they risk being regarded as 'nerds' or as 'D.A.R. – damned average raisers'. Coleman argued that this unique and historically new adolescent society is based on counter-school values. Hence, students' conformity to their peers' values is the root cause of their low academic achievement (Coleman, 1960).

The 1966 report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman et al., 1966b), again used a decision-to-conform mechanism to explain the empirical results. In that study Coleman pointed out the centrality of student-body composition in accounting for student achievement. He showed that students' social background and aggregated features of the student-body composition account for more variance than school-to-school differences in resources and teachers' characteristics and qualifications (Kahlenberg, 2001). More specifically, Coleman showed that 'as the proportion of white [students] in a school increases, the achievement of students in each racial group increases' (Coleman, 1990a: 92). The findings revealed that it was not race, per se, that explained between-group disparities, but rather the higher educational backgrounds of whites and the higher normative aspirations that white parents convey to their offspring. The study suggested that, since minorities tend to conform to the values of their better-off peers, the latter become assets for learning. Hence, the choice to conform became a prime explanatory mechanism. For example, Coleman suggested that minority students achieve better grades in higher socioeconomic status schools because they conform to white middle-class normative students who more commonly aspire to attain high academic achievement.

The essential question to ask, then, is why are students so eager to conform to peer norms; or in other words, what is the driving motivation that leads students to choose conformity? Coleman's answer seems to be that students choose to conform to the rewards of the leading crowd because they are existentially uncertain about their own identities. Therefore, to alleviate their concerns about themselves, students look at the observable behavior of prominent individuals in the adolescent status system. They conform to others' values in order to gain esteem and reduce self-timidity; namely to alleviate their uncertain sense of self. They do so because they seek to enjoy popularity and feel accepted by others. In

this way, however, students sacrifice their individuality and imperil future objective life chances. Being intimately familiar with the life world of students, Coleman had a clear sense of the short-term existential basis of student behavior. The following quote is testimony to his basic presuppositions:

'If I could trade, I would be someone different from myself.' The pathos inherent in this statement has peculiar relevance for a teenager. He cannot choose, as yet, the social situation or the activity that will make him feel at one with himself. He must see himself through the eyes of a world he did not make, the adolescent world of his community, into which the accident of residence has thrust him. If, in its eyes, he has done well, then he can be at peace with himself; if he is not accepted, recognized, looked up to, nor given status of any sort, he finds it hard to escape into another place in society where he can find recognition and respect. Instead, he turns inward; he must question his very self, asking whether it would not be better if he were someone quite different. (Coleman, 1961: 221)

Coleman further suggested that high rates of geographic mobility increase adolescent insecurity, because in such cases students have to re-establish their social standing several times throughout their schooling years. Since they can never trust an inner core of self-assurance, students become highly susceptible to peer influences. Like Reisman's explanation of the 'other-directed personality' (Reisman et al., 1954), Coleman assumed that because of their insecure senses of self adolescents are ever more eager to gain the esteem of their peers by conforming to their expectations. The causes of behavior, then, are not future assessments of instrumental utility; rather, behavior is driven by inner insecurity about identity and self-worth.

In essence, then, Coleman's explanation of students' rational choice to evade learning in school is predicated upon the assumption that decisions are based on short-term conformity to peer culture rather than on the maximization of long-term goals. This choice to conform is driven by existential anxiety about the self. Coleman was aware that students regard this choice to conform to be more critical than the instrumental decision to focus on learning at school. His studies suggest that students' assessments of future instrumental payoffs evaporate in the face of their being degraded by being labeled as 'dweeb', 'dork', 'suck-up', 'geek', or 'nerd'. His empirical analyses suggest that students prefer to jeopardize their future human capital rather than their self-esteem amongst their peers.

This reading suggests, then, that Coleman assumed that students' calculations work to maximize their self-esteem among their peers, rather than their future instrumental interests. To protect their timid, 'unfinished' senses of self, he said, students conform to their peers and obey the overarching values of the adolescent subculture. To prove his point, Coleman demonstrated that even the brightest students want their peers to remember them as something other than bright and academically hard-working. In so doing, however, students neither maximize their intellectual potential nor increase their future human capital. They merely provide immediate expressive answers for existential insecurity. They choose to do so by conforming to a jury of their peers.

### Existential Insecurity and Short-Term Rationality: Discussion

Many attest to the success of Coleman's overarching project to formulate a general theory of rational action. Different scholars have indeed suggested that he was the leader of rational choice theory (Fararo, 1996; Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997); many others still use him as an analytic cornerstone for constructing empirical investigations (Morgan and Sorensen, 1999) or reforming public policies (Putnam, 2000); yet others use his theory in explicating their own approaches (e.g. Burt, 2001). For example, in an analysis of Coleman's contribution as a social theorist and moral philosopher, Favell (1993: 590) wrote that his *Foundations of Social Theory*:

Contain[s] what is, to date, the most advanced attempt to apply a universal rational choice theory to the entire range of central questions in social theory. In its most ambitious moments, it also contains the bold articulation of a theory that can tackle the central questions of moral and political philosophy, a positive social theory that will lead to normative statements about society ...

This and similar appraisals suggest that Coleman's intellectual project, which aimed to develop a purposive, future-looking rational actor model, was well received (Collins, 1996; Hallinan, 1999; Pallas, 1999). Notwithstanding the many omissions for his contribution, Coleman's rational choice theory was also frequently criticized (e.g. Boudon, 1998, 2003; Fararo, 1996; Smelser, 1998). Most of the criticism refers to his stringent assumptions of instrumental rationality (Moessinger, 2000), or to the centrality of individualist assumptions in his model. In that respect, the critics take issue with the explicit theoretical presuppositions of Coleman's rational choice approach to general theorizing.

This article opts for a different tack. The strategy adopted here was not to argue with Coleman's explicit theoretical presuppositions, but rather to demonstrate that under his explicit rational action framework lay an alternative theory of action. Close reading of his empirical investigations brought to the surface his latent and deep-seated assumptions about subjective anxiety and personal uncertainty, which constitute a substratum of motivation in social contexts. It has shown that – in contrast to his explicit account – existential insecurity lies beneath Coleman's rational actor model; and that the motivation to gain acceptance or approval by others is what actually drives choice. Therefore, despite his totemic position in the 'hall of fame' of rational choice theory, Coleman was actually proposing an alternative theory of maximization, namely the maximization of subjective security under conditions of uncertainty and social competition. The maximization of subjective assuredness meant, however, that long-term instrumental benefits were sacrificed for this short-term expressive haven.

This article has exhibited that Coleman's basic motive for action originates from actors' expressive attempts to decrease uncertainty and existential insecurity. From that perspective, actors do not strive to maximize future instrumental returns on investments; rather, they endeavor to protect their self-esteem by

appearing most favorably amongst significant others – not in some hypothetical future, but rather in the here and now. True, actors purposively calculate the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. However, they engage with this mode of thought out of fear and personal timidity; and the calculations they pursue are not of future instrumental payoffs, but of immediate personal appearance in the eyes of others. In other words, actors are not engaged with calculations of long-term interests, but rather of immediate social approval. As Coleman argued, actors do employ maximization mechanisms. But his subtle analysis suggests that they maximize immediate expressive utilities, namely those related to self-esteem and to one's standing in a community of peers, even at the price of sacrificing long-term instrumental interests.

Herein lies a paradigmatic dividing line between Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action and Coleman's rational choice theory. While both agreed that action is based on conformity to cultural values and social norms, they differed in the way they explained conformity. Parsons regarded it as an outcome of a long process of socialization by significant and generalized others. His functionalist perspective depicted actors as abiding by social expectations as a result of the internalization of social and moral codes. Actors conform, said Parsons, because they are social beings constituted by society.

In contrast to this over-socialized and passive depiction of human nature (Wrong, 1999), Coleman suggested that, while actors do tend to conform to others and imitate their preferences, they do so intentionally. He assumed that actors are highly cognizant of their situations; that they plan ahead for future outcomes; and that they can rationally assess resulting outcomes of different decisions. He further assumed that actors manipulate their behaviour; strategically choosing behavior that will maximize benefits. In other words, he argued that actors actively decide upon appropriate paths of action, using different tactics and maneuvering between alternative courses of action.

However, Coleman's explicit assumptions about the long-term calculative spirit of actors are joined by implicit ones, namely that actors rather pursue immediate interests to gain certainty and the approval of others. His actors seem to suppress their long-term interests and present crafted and fabricated selves which best fit accepted normative patterns. They do so because of their existential insecurity; because they fear that a non-conformist response to others will backfire with reprisals. Fearing the response of others, actors sharpen their rational senses and choose the persona, image, or behavior required in order to appear most favorably amongst peers and significant others. In that sense, indeed, Coleman's paradigm is built on purposive assumptions, allowing room for agency and strategy. Still, in contrast to his alleged axioms, his concrete explanation of action is shown to be motivated by short-term motives that emanate from existential insecurity.

This gap between Coleman's explicit theoretical presuppositions and his empirical explanations is typical of his career. When he focused on logical arguments, he was careful to be consistent; when he attempted to explain empirical



cases of choice, he was meticulous in describing the realist mechanisms that motivate action. As Heckman and Neal declared (1996: 82), 'Coleman the empiricist is clearly not the same person as Coleman the theorist.' This article provides a concrete example for this gap between theoretical logic and empirical explanation in Coleman's sociological analyses. However, in attempting to understand Coleman's mode of thought, the analysis weighted more heavily his empirical explanation of behavior and choice. Theoretical models obey the laws of logic, but empirical acumen necessitates close attention to the real working of actors in social contexts. Paradigmatic rigor is an ideal that aims for the aesthetics of pure mathematical models, but the rational reconstruction of concrete social institutions (e.g. catering for school reform) requires pragmatic flexibility through humble encounters with actual people in those very contexts. There is no doubt that Coleman preferred empirical accuracy to logical coherence. Therefore, in assessing his 'true' explanation of action the analysis tilted toward the former. It has come full circle to the conclusion that, in interpreting his empirical results, Coleman's explication of action combined rational-choice assumptions with a realistic understanding of the existential and paradoxical trade-offs between short- and long-term choices in human endeavors.

This gap between Coleman's explicit model of rational action and his latent existential interpretation of actor conformity raises an issue of intentionality, namely: was Coleman aware of these two levels? Was he different from Parsons, who used the rational actor model as a yardstick to evaluate departures from rationality? While it is difficult to arrive at a clear post hoc answer to these questions, the evidence suggests that the dual mode of explanation is evident in Coleman's work from his first writings up to his final notes. Further, it seems that he was not fully aware of this gap between his rational theory of action and his realist explanation of choice in empirical settings. A close exegesis of his texts does not support an intentional position. Rather, it points to a pragmatic attempt to interpret behaviors that seem to be irrational on the surface but are meaningfully coherent in the American setting. By juxtaposing his short-term explanation of choice with the long-term ideal of utility maximization, Coleman may have unintentionally directed future realist developments in the rational-choice paradigm. Being an American pragmatist, Coleman saw no logical contradiction between the two levels and his approach implicitly encouraged researchers to combine short-term and long-term utilities in explaining action. This pragmatic position follows the classical American pragmatist conception of truth, namely that:

... any idea that helps us to deal, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that fits, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality. (James, 1948: 166)

As Heckman and Neal suggested (1996), it was not logical purity that Coleman preferred; he was rather keen on empirical verification. This is why he could encompass seemingly contradictory rationales in his theoretical approach and still be reaching for 'truth'.

## Conclusions

This article has shown that beneath his rational presuppositions, Coleman's concrete explanations of action made constant reference to existential anxiety and personal uncertainty. Hence, Coleman's interpretation of his empirical results – admittedly not the only possible ones – has proved to be an excellent resource for gaining a more comprehensive and surprising understanding of his theory. His empirical investigations have also provided a good source for gaining insight about the conformist action that actors pursue in order to conceal the existential anxieties that modern society so pervasively produces. This analysis suggests that a revised model of rational action should incorporate expressive, self-centered interests into models of instrumental utility maximization. Such relaxation of Coleman's explicit take on the utilitarian tradition would make the model more realistic and useful – and closer to Coleman's own implicit concept of man. By integrating expressive socio-cultural objectives, e.g. the reduction of anxiety and uncertainty, the revised rational choice model may serve as a better explanatory model.

This article suggests, indeed, that Coleman's purist concept of 'rational choice' may gain more power by explaining action as the outcome of varying mixtures of assessments of future objective utilities and immediate expressive interests in different settings. Notwithstanding his instrumental utilitarian theoretical commitments, Coleman seems to have latently appreciated the complex and expressive features of choice embedded in empirical settings. Future Colemanite rational choice approaches should thus relax his overt and one-sided theoretical commitments while utilizing his own empirical insights into actors' expressive will to conform. By estimating both short-term existential interests and long-term preferences, future studies might be in a position to better explain the paradoxes of choice that serve as sociology's long-standing and enticing 'hidden abode' (Portes, 2000).

## Notes

- 1 It was ranked 23rd in the survey of the most influential books in sociology by the International Sociological Association; it is also quoted by 3582 authors, a figure which is one of the highest for any book or paper (Google Scholar search, June 2006).
- 2 Coleman's latent theory of action – though anchored in expressive moments of existential insecurity – differs from Bourdieu's theory of habitus as embodied action tendencies that are pre-rational and mostly unconscious. These scholars differ in the terms they employ – social capital and cultural capital – but also in their concept of man (rational versus pre-rational) and their theory of action.

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